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1.

INEVITABLE CONSEQUENCES

OF A

R E F O R M

I N

PARLIAMENT.

By WILLIAM PLAYFAIR.

by
Learn to be wise ~~at~~ others harm,
And you shall do full well.

Old Ballad of the Ladies Fall.

L O N D O N :

Printed for JOHN STOCKDALE, Piccadilly,

1792.

[Price One Shilling.]

11/10/1796 150

INEVITABLE CONSEQUENCES

OF A

REFORM IN PARLIAMENT.

EVERY work of man requires a *reform*; because every work of man is imperfect; but experience and common sense teach us, that we should know how and in what manner a reform or amendment is to be obtained, before we run any risks in attempting it.

Great Britain is an island, peopled at present with nine million of inhabitants, rich as individuals beyond example, and powerful in a collective body beyond what either the population or extent of the kingdom entitle it to expect.—Yes, my countrymen, I speak it with the honest pride of an Englishman, this island, but a few leagues distant from the great continent of Europe, possesses more wealth and power, and enjoys more

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tranquillity and freedom than any of those immense nations that people this most important quarter of the globe.

We have arisen to this enviable situation under that mixt government which we now enjoy, which alone is a great argument in proof of its goodness: and certainly the imprudence would be great beyond measure, to risque a change upon flight or uncertain grounds.

To preserve the constitution and liberties of England untouched is what I wish;—as those persons who cry out for a reform of Parliament say that their end is the same, it remains to inquire, with coolness and candour, which of us takes the right road.

I should be glad if those gentlemen who call out so loudly for a reform of Parliament would tell us *what sort of a reform they want*, and explain to us what advantages they expect, otherwise I must consider them as children, crying out for what they do not understand---eager for an unknown something, the possession of which is more likely to be pernicious than pleasing.

As a real and downright lover of freedom and of peace, which things I hope never to see separated

rated in this kingdom, I have, for some time, perceiving that all men are not patriots who pretend to be so, watched the motions of those gentry pretty closely, and cannot help publicly accusing these reformers of an unfair manœuvre in the present case.---If I am wrong, let them answer me.

To call out for a reform without knowing what sort of a reform they would demand, and what the probable consequences will be, is the act of men either mad, ignorant, or badly intentioned. Those who lead the reformers may, perhaps, clear themselves readily of the two first charges, but they could escape the latter only by submitting their plan to the public, at the very time of proposing the reform; which they have taken care not to do:---on the contrary, by enumerating and exaggerating the evils of our present mode of representation, they try to turn the general opinion in favour of a reform, before the people can actually be in a state to judge of its propriety and wisdom, being totally ignorant of its nature. This is very unfair. But thus it is, that, by exciting general discontent against the present system, they would obtain the public

voice in favour of whatever plan they may propose in Parliament as a reform.

Such is the manœuvre; but every man of common sense should be ashamed to speak in favour of a reform, the nature of which he does not know. Let us not, however, fall into the snare which they have laid for us :---let us, on the contrary, examine what sort of a reform they can give us, before we speak in favour of their doctrines; as it is unworthy of thinking men to be drawn into a blind approbation of any measure.

The three following assertions, if proved, as far as moral probabilities can go, will, I think, put that matter in a very decided and clear point of view :

1st, A partial reform is in itself ridiculous, and I may say, impracticable; and a complete reform would bring on a revolution.

2d, A revolution would be attended with a civil war and national bankruptcy. The ruin of our trade, manufactures, and national importance, would be the immediate consequences.

3d, The present advantageous situation of Britain, once lost, is of such a nature as is never likely

likely to be recovered; and, even in point of freedom, we have more chance to lose than to gain by a revolution.

The imperfections of the present mode of representing the people in Parliament are evident to every one; and, of consequence, all parties have agreed in acknowledging their existence.

Every one can perceive it to be unjust that Old Sarum should send up two Members to Parliament, while Manchester and Birmingham do not send up one; but every one does not, perhaps, observe, that the same injustice takes place, in a greater or less degree, in the election for every borough and county in England.

It is clear, that were the present mode of election altered, for the sake of what may be called an equal representation, it would be necessary to reduce the elections to an *arithmetical exactness*; for certainly to reject the present in order to adopt other errors, would be ridiculous: besides, were the Parliament of England weak enough to redress the grievances in part, and stop short at an arbitrary point, which they themselves might think proper to fix, it would excite more discontents than ever, and very justly: the present times

are too enlightened, and too well informed, to admit of any arbitrary change; it must be a reform upon principle, or none at all.

But every reform upon *principle* must require the number of elected to be regulated by the number of electors; and, instead of lopping off the rotten boroughs only, every town in the kingdom should send up a number of Members proportioned to its size and population; or rather, as every town makes part of some county, no town should send up any Members at all.

Again, as the counties are not equal, either in extent or population, they should not send up equal numbers of Members.--Middlesex would then send up more than fifty Members, while some counties would be entitled, in proportion, hardly to send one.

There are but two ways in which this can be regulated, either every town and village must become a borough, as in France, or else all boroughs must be done away, and there must be no Members but for counties; in either case, the present boroughs would make but a very small figure in the new reform. Let them, therefore, well weigh this consideration before they support measures

measures by which they must inevitably be deprived of all their consequence.

Whichever of these two methods were practised in equalising the representation, the change in the constitution of the country would be prodigiously great; and we ought, I think, to consider a while before we lay the axe to the root of our old constitutional oak, which has flourished so long, and under the branches of which we are so happy.

Greatly, however, as our representation would be changed by this new mode of election, that is the smallest of the consequences of a reform.

The rights of voters require as great a revival as the rights of boroughs; and in regulating this upon principle consists the greatest difficulty, and the greatest danger; it is, indeed, a matter which can scarcely be too cautiously inquired into, after the ill success of France, the greater part of her misfortunes having originated from that very cause.

A vote must either be given by a man on account of his property, or merely because he is a man. But by what rule can the reformers determine what quantity of property is to give a

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vote ? any regulation whatever on this subject must be absurd and unjust, as it must be arbitrary. The Constituent Assembly in France has given us an example of the absurdity of making such a rule, and the impossibility of its being long adhered to ; the arbitrary distinction made by that legislature among people of the same class revolted every one, and was one of the principal causes which overturned that constitution before it was a year old. On the other hand, were the natural rule to be adopted of giving every man a vote, then would the assemblies of electors be ruled entirely by the lower class, which is the most numerous in every country ; and the proprietors, and even tradesmen, finding themselves the minority in all assemblies, would, from a sense of their inferiority, and an experience of the mortifications to which they were liable, absent themselves from all elections ; and thus the real proprietors of the kingdom would not be represented at all, as is the case at this moment in France. Thus would the nature of the electors be completely changed, and the nature of the elected must soon change with it. That wise regulation that requires a certain property for him
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who represents his fellow citizens in Parliament, would soon be done away ; first of all, because it would be in the power of the electors to change whatever they thought proper, and it would be their disposition very naturally to do it ; and secondly, because that regulation is founded in policy, and not in equality, or the natural principle of representation.

Then might the British Parliament be said to be fallen indeed, and would instantly become, like the National Assembly, or Convention of France, a set of intriguing, indigent men, representing another set of indigent men, and pillaging all the men of property in the kingdom.

Between the present imperfect, though successful mode of representing the people, and a representation such as I have here described, I see no medium, no point to stop at, no rule for direction ; and what is worse, as soon as the present manner of electing shall be changed, in any degree, there will remain neither argument nor force to prevent a further change.

The danger here described seems already to be perfectly sufficient, to deter all well-meaning and well-affected men from meddling to support a re-

form : but I perceive another evil, which, though not so certain, I think might very probably take place.

If the present mode of election should be changed on account of its imperfection, would not that alteration carry along with it an idea, that the laws made while the Parliament represented the people imperfectly, were subject to a revision by the new-modelled Parliament? This is a question necessary to be decided ; a question which the French have repeatedly decided, and always in the affirmative—they decided that all the transactions of the King and his Ministers before the revolt were liable to revision, from the beginning of the monarchy ; and they claimed an equal right to abolish titles of nobility, and grants made by the crown 500 years ago, as to abolish a contract made, or a pension given yesterday. The second Assembly used the same right with regard to the first, and now the Convention exercises the same from the oldest records to the present day.

I do not presume to decide the question, as applied to the changes in the British Parliament, but I believe the strongest arguments would be
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in favour of the revision, and the will of the Members certainly would; the probability of a complete revolution is therefore very great.

When I said, that a partial reform was impracticable, I meant so literally; but I must explain myself a little. Any kind of reform the King, Lords, and Commons chuse to sanction, is practicable for a time, but unless it be a reform that satisfies reason and justice, it can subsist only for a very short time; and though it might be only step by step that all the changes I have pointed out might finally arrive, yet it is perfectly evident, that the same arguments that may be used in favour of the first reform, might be used again, with the same reason, and with more advantage than they are at present. Far be it from me to speak against the rights of any class of citizens, or to write any thing against liberty in its utmost practicable extent; but ~~these~~ are regulations that have their rise in policy and experience, as well as those that have their rise in right; and although they cannot be made to uninstructed minds so clear and obvious, their utility and value are not therefore the less; and it is an inestimable advantage to have what cannot always be explained,

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plained, but yet is very necessary, rendered as it were sacred by use and custom.

As a Whig, which I glory in being, perhaps it may be thought strange, that I should offer any argument in favour of the present mode of elections. What I have hitherto said, contains, indeed, only objections to a reform, and not a defence of the present system; nevertheless, I have also some arguments to advance in favour of the present mode.

I regard, then, an equal representation as a thing impracticable in a country where property is so unequally divided as in this; and if it is to be imperfect, as it is now, the variety of circumstances under which the different boroughs and counties are placed at present, affords undoubtedly a great advantage, as it prevents any combination among the electors to overturn the constitution. Now, as I consider peace, and leisure to follow our different occupations, and to enjoy the fruits of our labours, as among the greatest blessings, I am happy to think that it is not easily in our power to unite in those turbulent political societies that overturn every thing.

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It may not be improper here to make a few remarks on a notion that led the French levellers into great errors at their first outset; at present they are beyond the reach of error from example ill applied, as they are infinitely beyond any state of anarchy and confusion that the history of the world records.

The Romans, and several Grecian states, seem to have voted in a pretty equal manner, and as that method succeeded for a long time, it seems to prove the practicability of such a system.

The Romans were certainly a superior race of men, and for some centuries were real patriots, preferring the grandeur of their country to their individual welfare. Although, I believe, we do not in this matter equal them, yet as there is no thermometer to measure patriotism, what I say reduces itself to an opinion, and has not the weight of a fact. However, there are facts that render all parallels between the Romans, or Athenians, and ourselves, perfectly inadmissible. In Rome, the *majority of the people were slaves*, not only the menial servants, but the artificers; of consequence, that class of men, who would make the majority in all our elections, were not
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even honoured with the title of citizen. At Athens, the case was the same; the Roman citizens had almost all of them some property, and after all it is to be observed, as soon as luxury and corruption gained ground in the state, their system fell to the ground. It has been so with all other popular governments, though not any one of them was carried to such an equal representation, or general voting of the people, as has been with so little success attempted in France. Yet such an equality must be the final aim of every reform in our Parliament, which on no other plea can be demanded.

Of America, which also has been held up as an example, let me observe, that the almost untried republic in that country is under the most favourable circumstances that ever occurred, for such a government; and no country in Europe ever will be in a state at all resembling it. First of all, in America most of the inhabitants are proprietors, and those that are not so have an immediate prospect of becoming so. Add to this, that free, in great measure, from the luxuries and vices of Europe, and in a fertile soil of which they have more than they can cultivate, they

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have neither necessity nor temptation to commit great crimes, and of consequence their liberties are easily preserved : few taxes, and no foreign enemies, complete the contrast to our state of affairs all over Europe ; in short they are almost in a state to admit of their living without any further bond of society, than that which virtue and wisdom form, to men who know that mutual assistance and friendship are necessary to render life agreeable. The punishment of crimes, public works, and above all, protection from foreign enemies, are the original cement of Government of every form ; America has little of these causes, and of consequence may enjoy a relaxed republic : but we can draw no inference from such an instance, respecting European states.

Those who misled the French by endeavouring to make them imitate America, have much to answer for, and one sees them without regret becoming daily the victims of their own projects, without increasing the number of the innocent.

The reformers will undoubtedly say that they by no means aim at such great changes, that they only mean to destroy abuses where they are extreme, and I am convinced that hardly any man

in England would desire a general undistinguishing reform. But let me once more repeat, that a partial one can be asked for upon no principle whatever; and, on the contrary, that there is some justice in letting things continue as they are, and a great deal of good sense, for it is leaving people in possession of the same rights that they inherited; and although these rights may not have been defined with perfect wisdom at the first, they are certainly more sacred than any that should now be granted in an arbitrary manner. The same spirit of amendment would therefore actuate the people after this reform, as before it, and with more force; and we should never stop until every thing was reduced to what the preachers of the Rights of Man call an equal representation.

But in addition to these arguments which will hold good at all times, there are particular circumstances which at this time give double cause of alarm on the subject of reforms.

Those English patriots who glow with the love of the constitution, but who so ardently seek a reform, openly connect themselves with the abettors of the French Revolution. Those very
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men with whom I should have been so proud to join in opinion, have disgraced themselves for ever by their connection with the French Democrats, who without virtue, religion, or even any regard to the common rules that are necessary to the preservation of society, have overturned a monarchy, and established a new constitution which they have vaunted to all the world, as the chef d'œuvre of the human understanding, and which they have overturned before they had fairly tried it.

If there be any morality, virtue, or religion in this country, I hope such men and their doings are held in just abhorrence, and that of consequence our English reformers who hold connections with them, will meet with no sort of confidence; that, on the contrary, their plots will be seen through, and their fair professions disbelieved. Let us recollect with what modesty the Abbe Sieyes in the beginning of the French Revolution asserted the rights of the people; he said that they were politically nothing, and they only wanted to become *something*. With what rapid strides they became every thing, we all know.

The French Revolution gives another lesson to men in all countries who wish to continue as they are, and let the voters in this country look to themselves, and not by intestine divisions become weak, as the nobility and clergy have in France. The voters and burghers in our boroughs should consider the privileges they enjoy, and not envy each other. If Liverpool and Bristol begin to envy Old Sarum, let them remember that the inhabitants of London have as much reason to envy them; and that when once they begin to reckon numbers, they become but as the drop in the bucket. Amongst the counties the thing will be the same, and as in the most populous places there is always the greatest prevalence of vice, the representation cannot be expected to be bettered.

But should a revolution happen, as it naturally and necessarily would, from the circumstance of transferring power from the hands of proprietors into those of the labourers, artisans, and manufacturers, a class of men, who though not proprietors, are, when industrious in their way, and not seduced from their employments, as estimable as any class in society; should such a revolution happen,

happen, can it, I say, be doubted a moment that a civil war would immediately take place? No, certainly; for one of the first things that happens in a sudden transfer of power is, that the taxes are not paid regularly; and were that the case in England, our boasted millions would not go for the surplus, revenue would not then do much for us, and we could not create assignats; we have not that resource, which supports, for a while, the crimes of those who have been employed in levelling the throne and the altar, in a neighbouring kingdom.

Our nation, as well as the individuals in it, depends chiefly upon trade, and trade is supported by credit and good faith, which would cease the instant that the public taxes were not paid, and the public creditor not satisfied. France was in a state of actual bankruptcy before the revolution began, and things were accustomed to be so arranged in that country, that the public creditor waited the time convenient for government; so that the revolution deranged nothing in the way of the payments. In England, on the contrary, where we pay regularly to an hour, the delay of a single hour would ruin our credit.

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The riches and intrinsic value of France are far beyond those of England, which is a country raised as it were by force, and the industry of the inhabitants, to her present state. The sale which she has obtained for her productions and manufactures all over the world, depends still more upon the long credits which the merchants are able to give, than upon the excellence or price of the manufactures. Now from the moment that intestine commotions should begin, our merchants would be able to give no longer such long credits, and of consequence they would lose in a great degree their foreign correspondents, never again to renew their commerce with them.

The navy of England could not be kept up without trade, and even supposing that order could be restored, the taxes would cease to be so productive; the bankruptcy therefore begun from the confusion of the circumstances, would be continued by the consequences.

We are not ignorant that our country is envied by the rest of the world, because of the success of our merchants, and the sums which they bring away from them, so that we need not doubt that all possible means would be employed to perpetuate

tuates the abasement into which we should thus have fallen. Our possessions in the West Indies would naturally be occupied by America; and as for Asia, it is to be hoped it might become independent, but certainly it would be no longer under our dominion.

Nor is it probable with all this, that the cause of liberty would in the end be advanced, for we are not established on a fertile enough soil to pass our time away entirely in politics, and neglect the plow and the spade. Industry would still be necessary, and anarchy would fatigue us as it has once done already, and at the moment of lassitude, it would depend merely upon chance, and the prevailing circumstances of the time, whether the yoke laid upon us would be like that of Oliver Cromwell, or whether it would be a wise arrangement like that made at the glorious revolution of King William.

It appears then, I think, very evident, that we run an immense risk in attempting any reform whatever; therefore it is worse than madness to attempt it. I do not, though a most firm admirer of the present state of things, mean to take up the time of my fellow citizens in be-

flowing praise on a constitution that is far above the praise of any man, having been approved by time and experience ; but give me leave to ask, what is expected from this reform of Parliament ?

Is it expected that the government will become more œconomical ? Suppose this to be the case, yet, as the interest of the national debt and the sinking fund amount to more than ten millions annually, the savings could only be in the six millions that remain. The civil list is one million, the navy two millions, the army nearly two, so that for the ordnance and other general expences, there remains but about one million. Suppose that on these it were possible, which I do not believe, to make a real œconomy of five hundred thousand pounds, which would certainly be a good thing, still that is but a saving of eighteen-pence a-head for the people in Britain, a sum certainly too inconsiderable to be sought after at such risques as those I have been pointing out ; besides, let it be observed, the reform would not, perhaps, save us that trifling sum, even upon the supposition of the partial reform being practicable.

Do we individuals consider the important pleasure of voting for a Member of Parliament as a great desideratum, let us consider also, that the more universally it is extended, the less important it becomes, and the pleasure dies away ; as in France where an active citizen, as he is called, is, for the most part, not at the pains to give a vote, which nobody is at the pains to solicit, and which he shares with 5700 others, for such is the number requisite to chuse a member.

But to be short, though Parliament may be accused sometimes of turning a deaf ear to remonstrances that are well founded ; and though grievances that ought to be removed, are sometimes left to continue, yet when the people decidedly throughout the nation shew their opinion, the King, Lords and Commons immediately comply, and this seems to me to be what the vain-glorious French are seeking after, by a wild mad-headed plan, and which they call the sovereignty of the people.

As to particular laws, they can but be the result of the good sense and experience of the representatives of the people ; and as it appears to me that the Parliament consists of nearly the fittest persons

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in the nation, I do not think we can reasonably expect better laws by means of any reform.

As to reforms of several vices that have crept into the administration of justice, and into particular laws, it were earnestly to be desired, and is not to be doubted, that the times are past when men are to be led blindly, or argued out of common sense; that can no longer happen: and if the present happy constitution is meant to be preserved, the Ministers and Lords must hearken to the general opinion, which, when it speaks, deserves attention, even upon matters of interior arrangement.

Of this kind, perhaps, is the privilege of exemption from arrest, a privilege much abused, and by that abuse, liable to encourage democratical principles; for it is revolting to humanity itself to see one part of the community imprisoned, in many instances, for the consequences of misfortune, and another triumphing in liberty, after the most wanton riot and extravagance.

If my arguments are wrong, let those whom it concerns answer them, if not, let them give up their plan, and cease to agitate a flourishing and a happy people with a reform so dangerous, and of
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which they have not yet announced the nature. May the example of a neighbouring nation teach us caution and timidity! may it also teach our rulers to be attentive to the interests of men, by removing those grievances that are justly complained of! and so the fatal experience of our neighbours may be productive of good to us, and the means of prolonging and increasing the prosperity and happiness of the inhabitants of this hitherto fortunate island.

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